
Video killed the 'PDF' star: taking information resource guides online



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INTRODUCTION

As library services adapt to digital users with evolving media expectations, at Dublin City University we are steadily migrating from traditional help guides towards online library tours¹ and e-tutorials for catalogues, databases and software.² As databases proliferate, so too do publishers' own multimedia guides and tutorials. Helpful as these are, is there anything we can do ourselves for our own users? The answer is 'Yes': easy-to-use technologies now allow librarians to create their own customised digital and video tutorials. This article will take a look at publisher-created video tutorials, consider the pros and cons of libraries creating their own video-format guides and report on our own experience in producing video-based tutorials on databases.

PUBLISHER-CREATED CONTENT

Content providers have been producing electronic database tutorials and guides for many years now. Rudimentary tools include using PowerPoint, in conjunction with screen dumps for visual illustration. Sophisticated tutorials have been produced using more involved applications like *Adobe Flash*. In recent times, simpler technology has become available that allows the capture of on-screen action to create demonstrations and animations.³ Screencasting – that is, the production of short demonstration video files with audio commen-

tary – has entered the field as a primary tool for online instruction.⁴ Tools that are commonly used include proprietary authoring software such as *Camtasia* or *Captivate* and web-based freeware like *Screentoaster*.

Comprehensive tutorials, or short clips?

Most of the providers we observed opted for a tutorial-style approach, where the main functions are progressively explained in detail. The tutorials we examined were typically divided into individual modules of around five minutes each, concentrating on distinct functions.⁵ Some, like *Web of Science*, went a step further, subdividing modules into shorter segments. Some modules were relatively long: *CSA*, *EBSCO*, *FAME*, *HeinOnline* and *ScienceDirect* all produced at least one continuous item of around eight minutes. While it might not seem too onerous to view clips of this length, some of them do move quite slowly. However, all allow you to regulate progress by skipping back or forward.

World SciNet took a different approach with five very short (approximately one-minute), well-produced clips. *Faculty of 100's* medicine demonstrations were equally concise but, while they were also well produced, they seemed to have rather a promotional feel to them, with only two clips substantially addressing the management of content.

Production quality

Some providers went for high-quality demonstrations of the type you get when you use products like *Captivate* or *Camtasia*.⁶ *CSA* explain their quick and advanced searches in two tutorials over about 15 minutes. They have a lot of information in them and move along at a fair pace. You can move the tutorial along to five fixed points. So it's user-friendly with high production values, the only exception being the inability to regulate a quite loud audio file. *ScienceDirect's* eight very comprehensive and methodical tutorials cover almost anything you might want to know about using the database. They total around 45 minutes, with almost all the segments at between five and eight minutes. Again featuring high production values, the tutorial is also easily navigable forward and back with each frame. There is no audio.

On the other hand, *ARTstor* and *HeinOnline* have e-tutorials hosted on *YouTube*. While we can't be certain what tools were used, they very much have the 'live' feel of screencasting freeware. *ARTstor's* four clips can be viewed either directly through *YouTube* or through a more organised programme of links at the 'video demonstrations'

link on their online support page. *HeinOnline* have put quite a number of clips up on their 'YouTube Channel' – 14 content-related items at the time of writing, totalling just short of 55 minutes. However, they are not presented in such an orderly way that you might classify them as a tutorial. The *ARTstor* and *HeinOnline* screencasts provide acceptable but low-quality clips that are far less clean than the much more professional-looking tutorials produced by *CSA* and *ScienceDirect*.

The accompanying voiceovers in the videos we examined raised surprising problems. First of all, four of the providers eschewed the audio option completely. Of the six who used audio, three set their default at a quite a high level, with no way to lower it. Another only offered a mute option. We would be of the view that the high noise levels are obtrusive both for the listener and also potentially for immediate neighbours in a quiet-study environment.

WHY NOT JUST RELY ON PUBLISHER TUTORIALS?

Some provider tutorials may perfectly suit your users' needs. However, a library might want to consider its own local, customised solutions, for example in situations where:

- a publisher does not have online tutorials
- a provider (such as *EBSCO*) hosts many databases but uses only a generic tutorial to cover them all
- context-sensitive solutions can be provided for local user groups,⁷ suggested by, say, service-desk feedback or issues raised at training sessions.

Users may prefer discovery tools like federated searching or *Google Scholar*, over individual full-text databases. Libraries might want to produce demonstrations for these discovery tools with local or subject considerations in mind.

Academic libraries have been producing online tutorials using screencasting techniques since at least 2004,⁸ so there is plenty of precedent for doing so yourself. Their value has been noted, especially for dealing with new or rapidly expanding categories of library patron such as remote users.⁹

PRODUCING YOUR OWN VIDEOS

Conceptualising

It is worth putting a bit of thought into what a video is going to be used for. In the simplest

sense, clips can directly substitute for print guides. However, their 'live' facility makes them useful for other functions, such as in demonstrations at information literacy classes and as back-up for fielding individual queries. Videos do not replace every aspect of these functions. It's probably better to see them as complementing existing services.

No matter which of the above functions you want a video to discharge, bear in mind that there are limitations on what they can cover. Video tutorials are difficult for users to concentrate on for extended periods, a problem also noted in the literature.¹⁰ Ideally they should be kept short and simple. Even if your objective is to roll out a sophisticated tutorial programme, consider subdividing the structure into bite-sized facets, as many of the publishers examined above have done. Essentially, a video should be designed to be watched in its entirety in one sitting.

Also bear in mind that sometimes a video might actually be counterproductive. For instance, if you wish to provide instruction for a complex, detailed task a PDF guide might actually still be the better option, allowing the user to perform a task in real time and follow it on the instructions on the sheet step by step.

Planning

We recommend that, before work begins on a video project, you plan and script it as appropriate. There are a number of factors to consider here: who your target users are, how important the tutorial will be for them, how much time you can afford to devote to it and your own familiarity with the material you propose to cover. If you are preparing a short video, a modest level of preparation, such as simple sequencing of events or ideas,¹¹ is appropriate. For a brief screencast, a simple mental model of what you need to cover may suffice, especially if it is based on your own experience of delivering library instruction.¹²

If you are going down the route of a sophisticated tutorial, you might need to take more detailed steps such as planning, storyboarding, production and review, like those undertaken by Wales and Robertson for their Open University literature search tutorials.¹³ Equally, if you have gone to a lot of trouble to produce a PowerPoint slide show, you can easily convert it into an e-tutorial.

Voiceover or no voiceover?

Voiceovers add a lot of work to your screencasting task. In creating our own e-tutorials, we found

it difficult to get voiceovers right. Each part of a clip needed several takes before we got the right speed and articulated speech clearly and without stumbling. It also took a while to get over the embarrassment of talking to ourselves in a shared office, repeating the same sentence several times!

Voiceover won't always be necessary. Many video capture applications allow you to add text boxes instead. An advantage of this is that users will not need headphones or speakers at their computer to use the tutorial. Indeed, for very simple clips, the video capture often speaks for itself, and no additional accompaniment is really necessary. This makes production a lot quicker and also makes it easier for you to keep tutorials up to date if, for example, a database is given a new interface.

Quality considerations

You want to produce quality work but you don't want to spend too much valuable time on cosmetic issues. We're librarians, not multimedia designers, and our users don't expect Kubrick-style production values. Once you're satisfied that your tutorial is clear and easy to follow, you should allow a certain level of imperfection, balancing the benefits of the video to your users against the time you could be spending on other important work.

OUR EXPERIENCES WITH CAMTASIA AND SCREENTOASTER

Camtasia: In 2008, we attended a short in-house training course on *Camtasia*, a commercial screen video capture program licensed to staff at our university.¹⁴ *Camtasia* takes new users a few hours to learn and it has a good selection of advanced features. It allows you to create extended, comprehensive tutorials. We decided to try it out by creating a series of e-tutorials on *SciFinder*, a chemistry database. *SciFinder's* own help resources were limited and when they launched a new interface we knew users would find it difficult to get started. We created four separate videos, each of between one and three minutes.¹⁵ The videos were based on PowerPoint slides we had already developed for actual classes. The main effort involved was to add voiceover.

ScreenToaster: This free, web-based video capture tool¹⁶ is easier to use than *Camtasia* but lacks its advanced features. You can edit clips as you go along to remove pauses or passages you do not want broadcast. There is the option to provide audio.

Experimenting with *Screentoaster*, we produced 24 short clips covering ten databases.¹⁷ We decided to keep them short and simple, without audio or captions. Most resources covered were full-text scholarly article databases, but we also covered working paper and newspaper databases as well as *DORAS*, Dublin City University's institutional repository. For six of the databases, a single clip was enough, but for others we produced as many as six or seven clips. For instance, we produced seven *Web of Science* clips, lasting under five minutes in all. They addressed distinct themes such as 'Setting up an advanced search'; 'Improve retrieval using wildcard'; 'Combine sets & create results list'; and 'View abstract & then full text'. The sequence addressed significant problems a user might encounter in searching the database. We chose these examples based on our experiences demonstrating *Web of Science* at our information literacy training sessions.

Overall we were happy with the outcome of the *ScreenToaster* clips. The software was easy to use and the quality of the video was high. After the decision to omit audio and captions, we were surprised at how much information the clips managed to transmit, as well as at how intuitive they were to use. We had a couple of minor misgivings, though. You can 'pause' a clip, but you cannot move the timeline forward or back. This could be a drawback if your clip is long (which of course we recommend it shouldn't be!). Also, as they are providing a free tool, there is nothing to stop *ScreenToaster* altering the look of a video screen, say by making logos prominent or introducing advertising. Both could distract users or suggest that the content of a clip is not the work of the library. You do, however, have the option of downloading your video clip and hosting it on your library website.

CONCLUSIONS

Our experience with screencasting was a very positive one overall. It was quite easy to get up and running with both *Camtasia* and *Screentoaster*. As for content, although we had a number of publisher tutorials to hand, we still perceived a large gap for a local perspective. Our video content was heavily influenced by our extensive library training experience and the specific problems our users might have. With this valuable knowledge, we could readily choose suitable video topics. We came to the general conclusion that short clips were better, for a variety of practical reasons such as quicker downloading,¹⁸ ease of consultation and future video maintenance and replacement.

If your library runs regular training sessions on using databases, you already have a lot of knowledge to convert to local use. You've probably been doing this work with print guides for years. In fact, if you think of all the effort that goes into the composition, screen dumping, formatting and editing to create a print guide, it really is a lot more time-consuming than producing a simple, short clip. Once you have got the hang of a screencasting tool, which for a novice can take as little as 20 minutes, you can actually make groups of clips very efficiently.

If you want to move up the quality chain and produce video tutorials with audio and text boxes, you'll need to invest more time in planning, storyboarding and production. But even here you can choose how much you want to invest and match it to your users' needs.

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